

American Fur Co. Buildings
Mackinac Island, Michigan.

3 ✓
HABS N o. Mich. 215

HABS
MICH.

49. MACKI

3.

PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA
District of Michigan

Historic American Buildings Survey
F. Orla Varney, District Officer
313 Garfield Building, Detroit.

AMERICAN FUR COMPANY
Mackinac Island, Mackinac County
Michigan

HABS No. Mich. 215
Page #1

HABS
MICH.

44 MACKI

3

Owner Mackinac Community House

Date of Erection 1822 and earlier

Architect Unknown

Builder Unknown

Present Condition Poor

Number of Stories Warehouse - 2 stories and attic
Residence - 3 stories and basement
Library - 3 stories

Materials of Construction: Entire buildings are built of wood of heavy timber construction on stone foundations. The residence and library are entirely plastered, but the warehouses were originally ceiled with pine boards put on horizontally, most of which has now disappeared. Wood shingles covered the roofs.

Other Existing Records: Autobiography - Gurdon S. Hubbard
John Jacob Astor Account Books
History of Mackinac - Major Dwight H. Kelton
Historic Mackinac - Edwin O. Wood.

Additional Data: See next page.

Additional Data: When the French, the first discoverers of the vast Northwest territory came to know the country with its network of lakes and rivers they found it to be the greatest fur producing region on the continent and soon realizing the importance of Mackinac Island, then called Michilimackinac, made it a central rendezvous for the coureurs des bois. These originally were men who accompanied the Indians on their hunting expeditions and returned, their canoes laden with pelts, which in Montreal were traded for the necessities and often the pleasures of life. We read as early as 1693 of 200 canoes laden with beaver pelts being brought from Michilimackinac to Montreal.

This trading continued until 1763 when the close of the war between the French and English saw the end of the French domination of Canada. The trade then fell into the hands of the British subjects, the old coureurs des bois were, after many lawless feuds, broken up and dispersed. It was not until three years later, profitable trade was resumed and through the efforts of Montreal merchants various companies were organized to systematically carry on this rich enterprise. Among the companies then formed was the Mackinaw Company which had its chief factory at Michilimackinac.

At the close of the Revolutionary War by the treaty between the United States and Great Britain, the island and all the territory south of it, passed into the possession of the new republic.

This treaty was unquestionably a severe blow to the English fur trade, which was the very heart of Canadian commerce, and the British refused to release their hold on so valuable a possession. It was not until the Jay Treaty in 1796 that the English garrison was forced to evacuate the Island, and the United States occupancy began.

The Mackinaw Company continued its operations on the Island until 1811 when John Jacob Astor purchased their interest.

John Jacob Astor, the first American to thoroughly realize the value of the fur industry to American commerce and to perfect an organization for its management and control, arrived in this country in 1784, and shortly after became interested in the fur trade, so in 1809 he organized the American

Additional Data:

Fur Company. In 1811, as before mentioned, the Mackinaw Company came under his control, with all its properties and goods. Then after gaining control of other fur trading companies, and effecting the passage of a law by Congress, making it illegal for foreigners to trade in pelts within the confines of the United States, the war of 1812 intervened and Mackinac Island was lost to this country, but the end of the war saw its restoration to the United States.

Thus it was that in 1815, peace had settled once more in the Northwest, our boundaries were definitely assured and Mr. Astor having practically eliminated all competition, the American Fur Co., actively began operating with the Mackinac Island factory as its headquarters.

The success of the factory on the island was phenomenal. In a few years their trappers and voyageurs ranged throughout the Great Lakes district as far west as the Rocky Mountains, through the Missouri River valley and down the Mississippi taking out pelts annually valued at from three to four million dollars.

According to Gurdon Saltonstall Hubbard who arrived on the Island, July 4, 1818, as a clerk, "The force of the company when all were assembled included about four hundred clerks, together with about two thousand trappers and voyageurs. One hundred of these clerks were accommodated in the Agency residence, about five hundred other employees in barracks, the balance in the homes of the islanders or camped in tents along the shore".

The buildings as originally built were a complete unit and presented to the passer-by a semi-fortified appearance, each building being joined to the next with a log palisade. Every spring and summer when the voyageurs arrived, many of them after an absence of one or two years, and hundreds of Indians with their squaws and families gathered on the Island for trading, the resultant drinking and revelry of the pleasure starved men made protection necessary for the vast amount of furs stored in the warehouses and also for the liquor and merchandise in the trading post.

Additional Data: (Continued)

There is much variation in the types of buildings, although all are of heavy timber construction their exteriors vary as to detail, and as the old Mackinaw Company having had their headquarters there for a number of years, must have had buildings in which to transact their business, it is my supposition that the warehouses are the earliest buildings in the group and date from the Mackinaw Company's occupancy.

The barracks (now the Library) sometimes called the "pork eaters" quarters, now much changed, was originally divided into sixteen rooms, eight to a floor, and served as accommodations for the clerks. It matches very closely in design the warehouses and appears to antedate the Agency residence.

The residence which was built, as closely as can be ascertained about 1822, by the American Fur Company, served as the Agent's residence and also accommodated some of the clerks who were employed in sorting, cleaning and counting the many pelts.

It is a nicely proportioned building of Colonial design set on a high basement with strongly barred windows. The interiors have finely detailed trim, fireplaces that although nice in proportion, are rather coarse in detail, and a stairway that runs the full three stories of the building, rail and newels beautifully and simply designed and as secure today as when they were first placed in position. It is a building built for living in a baronial manner, where hospitality was lavish and guests frequent. We notice in the old account books the following order: 31 $\frac{1}{4}$ gallons Teneriffe wine; 4 $\frac{1}{2}$ gallons Port wine; 10 gallons best Madeira 70 $\frac{1}{2}$ gallons Red wine; 9 gallons Brandy and one barrel of flour.

In 1834 Mr. Astor retired from the fur trade and sold his interest and charter to Ramsey Crooks and Robert Stuart who were then managers of the factory. Reverses and a diminishing supply of furs saw the decline of the American Fur Company, and in 1836 the removal of Mr. Stuart to Detroit saw its end.

Additional Data: (Continued)

Later the property was sold and after many alterations and additions was converted, about 1872, into a hotel. It is now the Mackinac Island Community House and Library but the additions of 1872 still remain, reflecting little of the boisterous days of 1820 when the batteaux arrived bringing with their cargoes, singing and hard living men looking forward to a summer of ease and rowdy merriment.

F. O. Keweenaw

District Officer
June 30, 1937.

FW 7/1/37